The POWER of WORDS

Are yours Helpful or Hurtful?

by Bill Rudge

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Words of Encouragement vs. Discouragement

From a Young Age

When Karen was 17 and I was 18, we committed our lives to Jesus Christ. Less than two weeks later, at that young age, we ran away and got married. We could have easily failed, both in our Christian walk and our marriage, had it not been for the encouraging words of Rev. Guy Bongiovanni and Rev. Roger Shaffer. They and others at Farrell Christian Assembly and First United Methodist Church of Sharon, Pennsylvania, as well as those from various denominations, encouraged our growth in our faith and knowledge of Scripture. As a result, we have served many years in various churches and ministries—most of those years here at Bill Rudge Ministries.

Have we faced times of discouragement and difficulties? Yes…a plethora of times! There were those whose goal, it seemed, was to discourage us from obediently serving Christ and to dissuade us from following Jesus' call into ministry. But the encouragers (through God's Holy Spirit) superseded them and God accomplished His work in and through this ministry, built from day one on God's Word and the leading of His Spirit.

Peter and Paul; Nero and Herod

During the first year of my new life in Christ, I worked with two other young men, considering them Peter and Paul because of their strong commitment to Christ. By word and example they encouraged and strengthened me in my faith. However, after a few months, they moved on and were replaced by two men I regarded as Nero and Herod—constantly seeking, through lying words and dishonest behavior, to oppose and undermine my faith in Jesus Christ. Needless to say, it was a challenging time in my early Christian life! However, that year revealed to me the difference between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error—between those who love Christ and those who despise Him—and the deadly effects of discouraging words versus the lifelong benefits of encouraging words.

Impact of the Tongue

Powerful

The average tongue is about four inches long and weighs about two ounces, yet it can be as quick as lightning, as sharp as a blade, and as devastating as a natural disaster. Friendships have been ruined, reputations tarnished, lives destroyed, families devastated, and churches split by the tongue. Social media can intensify and magnify the potential benevolent or malevolent use of the tongue.

Words are like arrows shot from a bow—once released they cannot be taken back. It may take months or years (if ever) to bring healing to a situation caused by careless or foolish words. That is why Scripture admonishes us to guard our tongues and speak words of wisdom and healing instead of foolishness and hurt.

While most Christians would never strike someone with their fists, many carelessly abuse and inflict pain on others with their words. Yet it is often more difficult for victims of verbal abuse and gossip to recover from a damaged reputation or a broken heart than from injuries caused by a physical attack. Virtually everyone has at times either spread or listened to gossip. Most people also know from firsthand experience the pain of being victimized by gossip—whether the information was true or not. So too we all remember times when we said something about someone else we later regretted. Gossip is like a stone thrown into a pond, sending ripples outward.

Poisonous

My friend and coworker in ministry, Jim Weikal, comments on the power of the tongue with the following words:

> A bullet fired from a deadly weapon can never be retrieved by the shooter. The speeding lead projectile quickly hits a target, hopefully not an innocent victim. In a similar fashion, a word fired off in anger toward any person cannot be retrieved either. The ears of the person send the voice to the brain where the content, intent and tone of the words are

indelibly recorded to be played over again and again.

Anger is often the spark that ignites the tongue to spew its deadly poison. Words can be so hateful and venomous that no apology will erase the mental scars and emotional harm. Physical scars from a cut heal on our bodies leaving clean skin, but verbal scars caused by angry words don't heal so easily, perhaps never. Remember, from our mouths come blessing and cursing (James 3:10). Ask God that your tongue be one known for speaking blessings.

Pause to Ponder

Out of the Heart

At times everyone could use a rewind button to reverse or an erase mode to delete something we impulsively or regretfully said, and Jesus informs us we are accountable for every word we speak:

> But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matthew 12:36-37).

Each individual is responsible for every spoken word: every untruth, deception, manipulation, malicious comment or gossip, slander; undermining a person, inflaming a problem; outbursts of anger, unwholesome words, mockery, condescending remarks, words of needless doubt and fear, foolish talk, profanity, and blasphemy. We choose words wisely because there are immediate, eventual, or eternal consequences from what we say and how we say it.

You may wonder, is it fair that what we speak affects our lives and even our destiny? Our words reflect what is in our hearts. Jesus said, “For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34). People with poisoned hearts spew toxins from their mouths while those with pure hearts speak words of comfort and hope.

Consequences

Our words can inflame a problem or help resolve it. When my son became head coach for a high school soccer team at age 19, I cautioned that he would frequently deal with angry players, parents, and fans. My advice to him was, “Control your temper and your words. Think of the consequences before you speak rashly or in anger. Equally important to what you say, is how you say it.”

When developing exercise routines and nutritional protocols or teaching self-defense, my principle is: “If it works, use it; if it doesn’t, lose it.” Similarly, regarding conversations, behavior, and relationships: “If it is beneficial, proceed;

if it is unprofitable, take heed."

Pause to ponder the immediate and long-term consequences before saying or doing something you will later regret. Attempt to be wise and in control of your words and actions. Care about your testimony; honor His name, and you won't undermine others with gossip and lies, or intimidate with angry outbursts and aggressive behaviors!

Controlling Your Words

Scriptural Truths

The Bible has a lot to say about controlling our words.
Psalm 34:13 says:

> Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.

Proverbs 11:13 informs:

> A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret. (NIV)

Proverbs 16:28 warns:

> A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends. (NIV)

Proverbs 21:23 advises:

> He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles.

Proverbs 26:20 asserts:

> Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. (NIV)

Proverbs 20:19 proclaims:

> He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, therefore do not associate with a gossip.

Luke 12:2-3 states:

> There is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be proclaimed upon the housetops.

First Timothy 5:13 tells us not to be:

> gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention.

James 1:26 comments:

> If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.

James 3:5-10 affirms:

> The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. (NIV)

Ephesians 4:29 admonishes:

> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (NIV)

In other words, "If you can't say anything good about someone, it would be better to say nothing at all!" Instead of wasting words degrading others, let's use our voices to inspire others, pray for them, praise our Lord and share God's

truth with others. Instead of repeating all the bad news, tell people the Good News. Instead of spreading gossip, share the Gospel.

David wisely said:

> I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle…(Psalm 39:1).

A basic rule would be:

> Keep your mouth shut, and you will stay out of trouble (Proverbs 21:23, NLT).

Think About It

"You'll have a thousand opportunities in your life…to keep your mouth shut. Use every one of 'em."

Lee Tressel

"The reason a dog has so many friends is that he wags his tail instead of his tongue."

Joe Hilko

"Lord, keep Your arm around my shoulders and Your hand over my mouth."

Dave James

"Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people."

Eleanor Roosevelt

The Importance of Clarity

An older couple who had been dating for 14 years asked me to perform their wedding. It was my first wedding as a young minister and was to be held in my home. Overhearing the conversation about this upcoming wedding, my daughter, Tabitha, who was seven, and my son, BJ, who was four, asked their mom what I was going to do. Karen said, “Daddy is going to marry them.” “What?” they asked. “Marry them? I thought he was married to you.” Later, kissing the kids good night, they asked, “How can you marry them, Daddy? You are already married to Mommy.” I explained that I was not “marrying” them—I was “marrying” them!

On another occasion BJ, who was then five, asked me, “Remember when you hypnotized Grandpa and Tabitha?” I said, “When did I hypnotize Grandpa and Tabitha?” BJ replied, “Last summer.” So I asked, “What do you mean by hypnotized?” He said, “Remember when you put them under the water?” I said, “Oh, BJ, you mean when I baptized them!”

Be sure you understand what the other person is saying. Don’t be afraid to ask, “What do you mean by that?” or ask them to give you an example of what they mean. Attempt to communicate clearly with others by defining your terms. If we are to accurately witness for Christ, then those to whom we speak must know precisely what we are saying, and we in turn must understand what they mean by the terms they use.

Problems that escalate into hostility and revenge often stem from miscommunications and misunderstandings. Instead of talking *about* each other, talk *to* each other. Striving to resolve conflicts before they get out of control, be certain you understand what the other person is saying. “Be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger” (James 1:19). In the same way, be quick to apologize and offer forgiveness.

Gossiping as Abuse

If we verbally abuse others or gossip about them, it would be as merciless as someone beating up a defenseless, elderly person. I would illustrate this point when speaking and doing demonstrations in schools and churches. My assistant, in the guise of a little old man, would walk by using a cane. Unsuspecting, I would kick out his cane; then I would proceed to do multiple kicks and strikes, abusing him while he was on the ground. Stopping the abuse, I would offer to help him up as I said, "I'm sorry." As he reached for my hand, I would kick him back down, then straddle him and do multiple strikes to his face and chest. When his wife came to help, I would kick and strike her as well. Although we were clearly acting, and the audience loved the demonstration, they got the message of how vicious gossip and bullying really are.

After this demo I would ask them:

> Would you be impressed if you saw me do that to an old person? No! You would be disgusted. Would you think I was strong? No! You would think I was weak for picking on someone weaker or smaller. That is not strength; that is weakness. When you bully, abuse, pick on or torment those who are weaker or smaller than you, or who are alone when you are with your friends, or call them names and hurt and humiliate them, you are being weak and disgusting. You are being as pathetic as I was, beating up that "old man." Remember, an insecure, jealous, hurting and weak person bullies others, puts them down, picks on them—while a strong and confident person helps others and does not have to show off to prove it. Be kind because you do not know what is going on in their life, family or with their health.
>
> Be a champion and make a positive difference in the world around you with your words, actions, and attitudes. Make good decisions and commit to building others up rather than tearing them down. Instead of discouraging others with your words, encourage them. Rather than hurting others by being mean or bullying them, be kind and help others. Remember, a strong person stands up for himself, but a stronger person

stands up for others.

Unprofitable Conversations

Gossip Defined

Gossip can be not only spreading lies and rumors, but also spreading the truth with wrong motives. Sharing anything about someone when (1) the act of sharing is not part of the solution to the problem, or (2) you are not safeguarding someone from being influenced by them, or (3) it is not of true benefit to the person hearing it, is gossip. Either keep your mouth shut or repent of your gossip. Do not camouflage gossip under the guise of prayer requests and concerns unless you are truly interceding for the person and situation.

Gossip is not only talking about someone else; it is also listening as someone else does the talking. “An evildoer listens to wicked lips; a liar pays attention to a destructive tongue” (Proverbs 17:4). If you participate in gossip by listening, just remember that if they would talk to you about someone else behind their back, they would probably also talk about you behind your back.

Believers in Christ must stop backstabbing, bickering, undermining, and attacking each other! My advice to the leaders of a church being destroyed by gossip was that their people should just rise up and say, “Enough. I don’t want to hear any more!” The gossip would soon subside. If every Christian refuses to tolerate gossip, is certain to get their facts straight before forming an opinion, and lovingly confronts so as to clear up any misunderstanding or false rumors, there would be far fewer conflicts and divisions within the Church.

In my opinion, those who believe and repeat what they hear without checking the facts, or who write or call anonymously, are cowards and lack integrity. But I respect those who, when they hear something questionable, call or write to get the facts straight. I deliberately avoid participating in “unprofitable” conversations. When people come to me with gossip about something that someone—especially those in Christian leadership—did to them, I usually tell them to go to the person they are talking about and speak to them face to face. If it is a legitimate concern or verified complaint, then I suggest we all meet so that the other person can share their side of the story. Often, the person spreading the gossip drops it.

Flattery and Boasting

Several years ago before a presidential election I wrote:

> It could well be that the upcoming presidential election will be lost by the one whose tongue causes them the most problems. One candidate appears to have a problem with lying while the other seems to have a problem with bragging and speaking foolish words. They both need to heed the advice of Scripture concerning the misuse of their tongues. One of the candidates will become the most powerful person on this planet, but if he or she cannot control their own tongue, what have they gained?

Human history is "littered" with foolish or boastful words which brought on disaster. The most vivid example lies yet in the future and will be fulfilled in the Antichrist. Revelation 13:5-6 and Daniel 7:8-25 reveal that the Antichrist will speak proud and boastful words and blaspheme God, His name and dwelling place, and those who live in heaven. But Revelation 19:20 and 2 Thessalonians 2:8 reveal that at Armageddon the Lord Jesus will slay the Antichrist and his cohort the False Prophet with the breath of His mouth and bring them to an end at the appearance of His coming when they will be thrown into the lake of fire.

Are we guilty of talking too much? Do we only talk about ourselves, or speak flattering words with ulterior motives? Proverbs 27:2 says:

> Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.

Negative Self-Talk

Are we too negative about ourselves? We often don't realize that negative self-talk is as destructive as gossip. When my 13-year-old grandson would miss a shot in basketball or soccer, he would say, "I am terrible at basketball" or "I am horrible at soccer." He would also lament, "I will never be any good at playing the guitar." I would say, "Don't say something that negative about yourself. Say something like, 'I need to improve' or 'I will get better as I practice more.' I had him do ten pushups for each negative comment he would say about himself. For a while he did many push-ups. Then when he would start to say something negative I would give him "the look" and he would stop in mid-sentence, drop down, and do ten pushups. Now I rarely hear him make any negative comments about himself—at least not in front of me.

When I, someone else or the Enemy implants a negative thought or hopeless feeling within, I counter it with God's Word. I memorize Scripture so that I will have the mind of Christ and be able to bring every thought captive to

obedience to Christ and renew my own mind by thinking about that which is true, noble, just, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8).

One of our staff members, Darlinda McDonald, shared these thoughts with me:

> When we are constantly making negative comments about ourselves, we don't leave any room for positive words. As we read God's Word and start seeing ourselves as He sees us, we will want to change how we speak about ourselves and others.

Speaking the Truth

Unfriendly Encounter

Early on in my ministry I confronted a pastor and supposed "prophet" about propagating false teaching and occult tactics in his church. He refused to meet with me and the people he had harmed, so I wrote a book exposing the problem but without mentioning his name; he retaliated by spreading malicious lies. Months later I saw him in a store and said, "Hi." He grumbled something under his breath. Walking on, I glanced back and noticed him whispering to a woman not his wife. I silently prayed, "Lord, do I walk away or do I say something?" I turned to approach him and said, "When I have something to say to someone I say it to their face. I don't whisper and mutter behind their back." Boy, did his countenance change! He quickly shut his mouth.

For years, those deceived by his lies and gossip hated me without cause until one of them read in Proverbs 18:17 that a person's story sounds true until you hear the other side. So this man brought a group of people from that church to my ministry center to hear my side of the story. When I finished, they were crying because of the lies they had believed. Since that day they have been loyal friends and supporters.

When To Speak

Well, Bill, some of you might say, "You occasionally speak out against false teaching. Isn't that gossip?" Let's get the Biblical balance concerning this! As believers in Jesus Christ and ministers of the Gospel, we have the responsibility to warn about false teachings and unscriptural practices. Jesus, the apostles Paul, Peter, John, and other Biblical writers did so. However, we must be careful that while we are obligated by discernment to examine and expose false teaching, we are not to judge the persons involved (1 Corinthians 4:5). Only the Lord can judge the true motives of someone's heart, and only He can determine their eternal destiny. So while I try to guard my tongue from speaking gossip, I continue to stand for the truth and boldly expose error and false teaching. When it is time to speak out, I ask the Lord for wisdom in what to say and for the love and courage to say it. When it is time to say nothing, I ask for the restraint to

keep quiet.

Consequences of Gossip

People gossip for a variety of reasons. Some use gossip as a way to take revenge on those with whom they are angry. Others who are lonely or bored wrongly conclude they have nothing better to do with their time. Some people use gossip as a means to gain power and control or to claim the center of attention. Habitual gossipers are usually very insecure and have poor self-esteem. By cutting down others, they try to build themselves up. That is why people engage in subtle put-downs or slander those of whom they are most jealous.

Like a Cancer

Gossip is like any other sin. At first it may seem harmless and even enjoyable, but soon it will consume like a cancer those who engage in it, and eventually control and enslave them. Proverbs 13:3 says:

> The one who guards his mouth preserves his life; the one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.

Jealousy, anger, resentment, and revenge that can motivate gossip erode the gossiper's physical, emotional, and spiritual health. We must realize that unrestrained gossip is symptomatic of a deeper problem. To continually engage in willful gossip without remorse or desire to change is a definite sign of serious emotional as well as spiritual dysfunction.

"The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart" (Matthew 12:34). What we allow to dwell in our hearts and minds will manifest in our words. The words we speak reflect our inner thoughts, attitudes and emotions; to control our words, we must be certain that our hearts are right before the Lord and that our minds are being renewed through His Word (Romans 12:2).

Victim or Forgiver?

Most of us have been or will be victims of gossip. While we cannot stop

all rumors, we can control how we respond. Instead of becoming bitter or seeking revenge, we can let the Lord's love and forgiveness flow through us. We can allow God to use this adversity to make us stronger and more committed to Him. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph had the right attitude when he forgave his brothers who had sold him as a slave into Egypt. He said to them:

> As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

Probably no one was a victim of more false accusations than Jesus Christ, yet He is the very one who stated:

> Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:11-12).

God's ideal goal for us as manifested in Jesus our Savior, Joseph, Daniel, Stephen, Peter, Paul, and many others is not only for us to refrain from gossip, but "not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. For, the one who desires life, to love and see good days, must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit" (1 Peter 3:9-10).

For Evil or for Good

The words we speak have power: to either encourage someone, give them joy, draw them closer to the Lord or to discourage them, make them sad, and even turn them away from the Lord.

Proverbs 12:18 exclaims:

> There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword,
> but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

The choice is yours: your tongue will be used for evil—to cut, hurt and destroy—or it will be used for good—to heal, help and encourage.

Proverbs 16:24 promises:

> Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and
> healing to the bones.

Psalm 34:12-16 gives you the choice of God's favor or disfavor:

> Who is the man who desires life and loves length of days that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and His ears are open to their cry. The face of the LORD is against evildoers, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

Encourage or Discourage

The pages of Scripture are laced with those who spoke words of faith and courage, thereby inspiring others to phenomenal achievements. There were also those who spoke words of doubt and unbelief, influencing others toward devastating defeats.

As a chaplain, I have heard the words of faith spoken by many dying

Christians which uplifted entire families. I have also been at the bedside of those not knowing Christ's love and forgiveness, speaking words of doubt and despair—giving no comfort or hope to their loved ones.

Day by day, how you live your life and what you say will create the ambience surrounding you at the time of your death and your final words to those you love the most.

My Passion

Physically, Mentally, Emotionally, and Spiritually

The following is such a passion of mine that I keep it on my weekly prayer and fasting list:

> May the thoughts and attitudes of my mind, the emotions, desires, goals, dreams, vision and motives of my heart, the words of my mouth, and my behavior and lifestyle be pleasing in Your sight.

My heart's longing is to glorify the Lord by being a faithful witness physically (Romans 12:1), mentally and emotionally (Romans 12:2), and spiritually (Romans 8:29). I desire to live by His biblical precepts and reach my maximum potential in all aspects of my life. It is my aspiration to walk in discipline and self-control—including the words I speak.

The Commitment

I do hope you will make a commitment before the Lord today that with His help, strength, and empowering you will seek to speak in such a manner as to bring hope, healing, and happiness to others. Use your tongue to positively and powerfully pronounce your faith in Jesus Christ and the assurance of His coming again. Use your words to motivate and inspire believers to remain faithful until the very end. Use your lips to praise the Lord and encourage the downtrodden!

As the psalmist proclaimed:

> My tongue shall declare Your righteousness and Your praise all day long (Psalm 35:28).

For More Information

Bill Rudge has produced numerous books, pamphlets and audio messages on a variety of timely topics. For a complete listing or a copy of his informative newsletter, visit www.billrudge.org or write to:

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